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**THE BADGE OF POWER:  
POLICE BRUTALITY TOWARDS THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN  
COMMUNITY IN THE UNITED STATES OF THE XXI CENTURY,  
THROUGH THE POETRY OF DANEZ SMITH IN *DON'T CALL US DEAD***

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### Abstract

This paper explores how the police brutality in the United States and the white privilege intertwine into creating a systematic racism that is embedded in the U.S political and social system. It does so through the lens of Danez's Smith book *Don't Call Us Dead*. Through Smith's beautiful and heartbreaking poems, the current situation of the United States is explored and restated in the form art. The racism towards the African American community is so present in America that the discrimination is highly increasing and therefore creates anger towards the ones oppressed by it. The discrimination is compared and contrasted with the white privilege that is present in the America of the XXI century, and explored through the understanding of what privilege is and how to effectively use it to promote respect and mutual understanding.

*Keywords:* racism, police, privilege, African-American community

### Resumen

Este proyecto trata el cómo la brutalidad policial en los Estados Unidos y el privilegio blanco están interconectados con el fin de crear el racismo que está tan presente en el sistema político y social de los Estados Unidos. A través de la visión de Danez Smith y de su libro *Don't Call Us Dead*, y a través de sus poemas tan bonitos y desgarradores, la situación actual de los Estados Unidos se ve representada en forma de arte. El racismo que hay hacia la comunidad Afroamericana está incrementando cada día mas creando enfado hacia esos que se ven afectados. Ésta discriminación se contrasta con el privilegio que está tan presente en la América del siglo XXI y se explora a través de el conocimiento sobre el mismo y de cómo usarlo de manera efectiva y con el fin de promover el respeto mutuo.

*Palabras clave:* racismo, policía, privilegio, Afroamericanos, comunidad

## Table of Contents

I.	Introduction .....	2
II.	Violence and police brutality in the United States.....	5
	This is America.....	5
	The Badge of Power .....	8
	Police Brutality.....	12
	Hierarchies of Death .....	16
III.	White Privilege and Systematic Racism in the US.....	18
	Understanding Privilege.....	18
	Silence.....	21
IV.	Conclusion: “tomorrow i’ll have hope” .....	23
V.	References.....	27

THE BADGE OF POWER: Police Brutality towards the African-American community in the United States of the XXI Century, through the Poetry of Danez Smith in *Don't Call Us Dead*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Dear badge number*

*what did i do wrong?  
be born? be black? meet you?*

—Danez Smith, “summer, somewhere” (2017, p.3)

The policing system is so important in the American monopoly, and such a big system is represented through quite a small object: the badge. A badge is such a contradictory symbol in itself as it represents so much power and privilege (which are not particularly good attributes in our society nowadays), while it also represents death, criminal and moral injustice and violence. Such a small object represents a whole system of oppression and discrimination towards people of color in the U.S. The badge represents the systematic racism that takes places in the United States of America, and that as a consequence travels to the rest of the world. The badge is both a physical object and a metaphor for something bigger than its material embodiment. Ta-Nehisi Coates (2017) in the article *My President Was Black* explains: “Whiteness in America is a different symbol—a badge of advantage. In a country of professed meritocratic competition, this badge has long ensured an unerring privilege, represented in a 220-year monopoly on the highest office in the land” (Love Will Make You Do Wrong section, para. 13). Coates is referring to the fact that if you are white and in a possession of a badge in America, the badge will award he/she who is in its possession with an advantage that only whiteness can behold.

Danez Smith is an African-American poet who was born and raised in St. Paul, Minnesota. Their<sup>1</sup> first book, *[insert] boy* (2015), a book centred in eroticism and sexuality and the queer body; an eye-opening exploration of the self, achieved the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Poetry in 2015 and the Kate Tufts Discovery Award in 2016. They are also the author of two chapbooks: *hands on your knees* (2013) and *Black Movie* (2015), which have

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<sup>1</sup> Danez Smith is gender non-conformant (non-binary) and therefore has expressed their desire on being addressed by the pronoun “they/them” as it is collective and embodies more than just the individual.

also been recipient of awards such as the Button Poetry Prize. The book in which I am mainly going to direct my focus of attention towards is *Don't Call Us Dead* (2017), which has also won a variety of awards for its honesty on HIV, and portrayal of a racist America that directs violence towards the African-American community. In addition, it was also a finalist for the 2017 National Book Award for poetry and won the Forward prize in 2018.

I will be focusing on Danez and on some of their beautiful poems. Reading Danez is for me both a hopeless and hopeful experience. Two terms which seems to contradict each other, but that go in parallel directions. Their poems are devastating and leave a sadness and an anger that can inspire a nation, but they also bring hope for a better future; they can wake up consciousness and raise awareness to a society that may think racism is completely and utterly abolished. Their poems are about protection and vindication, about fighting for the America that the people of color raised and are helping to raise every day; therefore, Toni Juncosa (2018) stated: "Smith's poetry is eager to engage with reality, it shows a crystal-clear refusal to remain trapped in between the pages of a book" (p.16). Their poems are those which cannot be described with just one word, they flow so easily and yet they are so emotionally hard to grasp, but they are extremely necessary in this day and age.

*Don't Call Us Dead* is an award winning book filled with poems that deal with a variety of different subjects, some of them challenging the white supremacy of the right-wing political and ideological party in the United States. According to Danez (2017) themselves the book deals with how "America makes sport tradition and an economic happen of the oppression and suffering of the murder of black people" (Danez Smith: *Don't Call Us Dead*) but also about how that "creates alternative realities full of joy within all the murder and the oppression" inside of the African-American community. Danez speaks from a collective voice, always using the "we" and not the "I", creating an echo of voices so that they can reach a bigger community. Kate Kellaway (2008) in the article "Every Poem Is Political: Danez Smith The Youtube Star Shaking Up Poetry" claims:

Danez's poetry prioritises community. Smith confirms the "value of community for the marginalised" before letting slip: "You don't have the luxury of being an individual. I mean it. To be black, queer or poor – to be an individual has always meant death for us. To be a woman alone is dangerous – we teach our daughters that, we teach black people that. Our liberation comes through community, organising,

collectivising. Individuality has meant death. Individuality has meant being marooned. Individuality is a privilege, right? The only people who can think of themselves as separate from the other people who have made their lives possible are straight white dudes” (para. 8).

My analysis in this essay will be based on some secondary sources as well as the main primary source which is Danez’s book. But it is mainly centred in the police brutality that is present in America and the depiction of it through Smiths poems. Danez (2017) stated in an interview that one part of their book *Don’t Call Us Dead* could be called “the black experience in America through the lens of police brutality” and the “home-grown violence against Black people in the USA” while the other would be specifically about queerness and HIV. Their poems investigate and define the black queer body in all its glory and confess their deepest sex and death agonies. I want to focus specifically on police brutality and violence through their poems and compare that to the white privilege that I am a part of through the lens of the XXI century America. Because although we may think racism is long gone, it is absolutely not. People of color suffer more persecution and discrimination from the police compared to white people, and through the understanding of the reasons of why that happens, I will try to state why that happens and how can we try to change the situation, while comparing this situation with the white privilege that I hold.

In the United States there is a crucial problem with race. And this is not new, this has been ingrained in the American minds for centuries. The past history of The United States cannot be changed and there is no use in trying to, there is no use in trying to fix it “history is what it is. it knows what it did / bad dog. bad blood. bad day to be a boy” (Smith, 2017 p.3). America’s systematic problem is the fact that white supremacy is national sport and one that a lot of its citizens are not willing to give up. But you know what? Only the ones who promote race and the ones who harbor racist thoughts can change this situation. This cannot be another white saviour<sup>2</sup> moment of glory, it cannot under any circumstance. Because we are not saving

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<sup>2</sup> The white savior is the white person who saves the day and helps the person of color overcome their problems,—because according to them, they cannot do it themselves— just to benefit its own persona. It is normally seen in movies such as *Green Book*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Hidden Figures*, which seem to oversimplify race issues to show how America is not racist anymore (Insider, 2019), and therefore, end up being another product of Hollywood in which the white actor does a heroic act to help and fix all the problems that the person of color may encounter.



the day, we are just trying to emend what America is promoting: hate, social and political discrimination, inequality, oppression, social exclusion, disadvantage, social problems and social divisions.

When analysing the subject of this project I came about a profound question: is the fact that I want to talk about white privilege in a work that deals with racism fundamentally racist? Centring a part of the project on my own privilege and with that taking away the focus of the actual matter can seem at first to take the spotlight. But then I remember why I wanted to talk about that specific subject in the first place: to raise awareness, to be an ally, to promote anti-racist behaviour, to educate and to conscious others (white people) as well as myself. The purpose is to raise the question of why do people of color suffer persecution and discrimination by the police while white people do not. If I succeed in my endeavours I hope that my work, through the lens of Danez's extraordinary work, will promote a deeper understanding of the current situation in the United States and of the white privilege, and luckily unite empathy and love towards the fight against racism.

## 2. VIOLENCE AND POLICE BRUTALITY IN THE U.S

### 2.1. *This is America*

“Don’t catch you slippin’ up (ayy) / Look at how I’m livin’ now /  
Police be trippin’ now / Yeah, this is America (woo) /  
Guns in my area (word, my area) /  
I got the strap / I gotta carry ‘em” (Gambino, 2018).

In this part of the essay I am going to focus on the current America of the XXI century. The song “This is America” by Childish Gambino could most accurately be the embodiment of the current America<sup>3</sup>. Danez (2017) in their book *[insert] boy* states in the poem “song of wreckage”: “in what broken home was America raised?” (p.100). Smith knows America is a place in which non-white people cannot feel safe; they know first hand the brutality and the violence that people of color have to undergo every single day. The

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<sup>3</sup> I am going to use the term ‘America’ to englobe the United States of America, as Danez does in their poems.

music video of the song feels like a direct representation of the actual situation in the U.S. Donald Glover, the author of the song, uses his body and the drastic dramatic dancing as a distraction of everything that is wrong and all the tragedy that is undergoing in the background. There is a group of kids dancing, they seem happy and are enjoying the moment, while the whole place is burning down in flames. People are being killed and no-one seems to see or care. The brutal killings that happen in the video represent the fact that “anything is possible in a place where you can burn a body with less outrage than a flag” (Smith, 2017, p. 65). A place in which human lives matter less than a gun.

There is a foundational problem in America, as crimes are continually occurring and increasing in areas where only people of color live. The cause of action is the widely increasing white supremacy in the US. According to the article “Why White Supremacist Attacks Are on the Rise” by Brian Levin (2019):

A 2017 ABC/Washington Post poll found 9% of respondents regarded Nazi views as “acceptable.” Europol noted that right-wing extremists arrests on the continent nearly doubled in 2017 over 2016. And in 2018, the Anti-Defamation League reported a 182% increase in hate propaganda, like leafleting at colleges, compared to the year before; according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the number of hate groups in America hit 1,020 last year, the highest level they’ve ever recorded (para. 5).

The numbers are rapidly increasing every year, and supremacy keeps winning in the U.S. According to Donald Trump, the current president of the United States, nationalism is not in itself bad, and it does not have a presence in America. After the Islamophobic attacks in New Zealand “President Trump answered a query about whether he thinks white nationalism is a growing global threat” (Levin, 2019) to which he answered in a very dismissive way: “I don’t, really” (Levin, para. 1). It seems like in the eyes of white supremacists racism is utterly dismissed; and therefore, treated as a frivolous subject which has no relevance in America’s socio-economical and political monopoly.

Since the 2016 presidency election of the United States, the phrase “America First” has been one to occupy the headlines, along with the increasing black-motivated shooting headlines. There can be a clear connection made between the election of a president who has been shown to be racist, and the rapid rising of criminality and violence against the African-American community. The fact that the current president of the United States is Donald

Trump creates a narrative in which fighting against racism becomes incredibly challenging. What he does is promote a white supremacy ideology as he embodies this same ideology himself, and has publicly stated it through his language. He harbors racism and has created an America in which it is completely accepted to judge someone for their race and to treat them with disrespect. “This is what it’s like, Glover’s video seems to say, to be black in America—at any given time, vulnerable to joy or to destruction” (St. Félix, 2019, para. 3).

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, an American politician from the Democratic party and also a U.S. representative for New York’s district, which comprehends the Bronx and Queens in New York City, is one of the voices against injustice and discrimination in the United States. She is creating a rhetoric in which she creates power through language and through facts. I came to know about her because she has become an internet sensation, and Danez usually favorites her brilliant tweets and responds to them. In one of them, and as a response to an article written about her in *The Washington Post*, she stated “The President defended Neo-Nazis who murdered a woman in Charlottesville. The Dept of Justice sued him for not renting to Black tenants. He launched his campaign by calling Mexicans “rapists.” He banned Muslims. The President is racist. And that should make you uncomfortable” (Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, 2019).

With Trump as the president of the United States, and as result of his racist rhetoric, “the number of hate groups active in the US peaked at 1,020 in 2018, a seven-percent increase from 954 recorded in 2017, according to the SPLC (the Southern Poverty Law Center), which began tracking hate groups in 1971” (Aljazeera, 2019). This is a direct result of an epidemic that was suppressed while Barack Obama was in the presidency, and that exploded the moment Donald Trump became president. It seems like a virus that was more or less hidden for a long time, and that suddenly, and when the country was at its most vulnerable state, struck like lightning into the lives of the people who were incubating that virus. It is such an important accusation to make, and I am aware of it, but it is clear that there has been an increasing narrative of hate that, even though it was always there, has resurfaced and has gained power with the 2016 election.

This virus can either be a real one or a metaphorical one. For instance, Danez is infected with the HIV virus, and focuses extensively on it on their poems. They create a comparison between the virus on their body and a metaphorical virus that would comprehend

the U.S. In *Don't Call Us Dead* there is a beautiful yet heart-struck poem called “recklessly” which represents “self-forgiveness and atonement” (Juncosa, 2018 p.56) in the form of a God-like prayer. The symbolism in the poem is astonishing. It creates a relationship between a cell in a prison and the cells in Danez’s body being infected by HIV. Furthermore, Smith mentions America in the color of their veins as if they were the colors of the United States flag. “I got the cell count blues / inside a cell: a man/inside his cells: a man / can you keep a secret? / a history of blood: from sacrament to sentence / the red the white the blue of my veins” (2017, p.41).

America is a “bloodprison” (Smith, 2017, p.41) in the veins of its victims. The blood in the veins and the blood of the people that are killed everyday because of racism. Danez is trying to escape their own body, but realises that they cannot do that. Smith tries to create a response to themselves about what America means to them, and how can things be changed and improved in order to get better. But soon after, they realise that being black in America is a burden much bigger than being white. It has no comparison in every socio-economical and political area of society. Harold Washington, an ex-mayor of Chicago, claimed “Ain’t it a bitch to be a black man in the land of the free and the home of the brave?” (Coates, 2017, I Decided to Become Part of That World section, para.12).

In the song “This is America” by Childish Gambino (2018), the author makes a reference to social media and the fact that when something outrageous happens in America, people decide to film it rather than to take action “this a celly, That’s a tool”. The world “tool” and “celly” can have another interpretation. Stephon Clark, who was killed in Sacramento by the police in 2018, had his phone on his hand when he was killed because the police thought he had a gun instead of a mobile. The policeman was not convicted of murder and he was not sent to jail. This is what the badge of power represents: the privilege.

## 2.2. *The Badge of Power*

Reader, what does it / feel like to be safe? white?

—Danez Smith, “Every Day is A Funeral & a Miracle” (2017, p.64)

“Violence, brutality, it’s the same story, just a different name” (The Hate U Give, 2018): Markeis, Emmet, Trayvon, Nipsey, Sean, Chucky, Bo, Meech, Eric, Michael, Jonylah, Huey P., Jordan, Jeremiah, Stephon, Malcolm, Willie. These are a few of the many names of people of color that have been killed by law enforcement officers in the United States. In the poems there are names scattered around like faceless bodies on the ground. Danez Smith (2017) writes in the poem “not an elegy”: “how long before a legend becomes a god or forgotten?” (p.67) Because all of these names that they mention in their poems are remembered because they died. They became legends because they were unfairly and brutally murdered. Some of these names are also mentioned in Danez’s poems, some of them are not because the shootings happened after they published their book. Smith uses names to heal, to cure the damage that has already been done. Inspired by Toni Morrison in *Song Of Salomon*, Danez also uses names in order to remember history, because when the names disappear, history and identity do as well.

The police kill African-American people every day and we do not even hear about it, because it is not the main importance for the president. Furthermore, Fox News<sup>4</sup> will not stop their existential pro-Trump ideology to talk about one of their fellow police officers being a murderer, but they will announce the fact that the attacker will not be convicted of murder or sent to jail. Meanwhile, the prisons are filled with people of color because their neighbourhoods are being persecuted and discriminated towards for the mere fact that they are not white and that the system declares them as dangerous.

The police should use violence to protect and to defend others that may be in fatal danger, they should not assume danger and shoot without making questions first “shoot first, ask questions later” (The Hate U Give, 2018). This has recently been represented in some films to raise awareness and conscious the people who are oblivious to this important issue. The film “The Hate U Give” (2018) accurately depicts how the police act in certain neighbourhoods and how to react to potential “danger”. The first lines in the movie say:

Now when it happens don’t act mad. You gotta look calm. Answer their questions but don’t tell them nothing extra. Keep your hands out of your pockets. You drop

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<sup>4</sup> *Fox News* is a news channel in the U.S. which has shown an avid support to Trump and his campaign. They have publicly mocked members of the Democratic party such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and U.S. Congress-woman Ilhan Omar (amongst others).

something, leave that stuff where it's at. One day y'all gonna be with me and you best bet we gonna get pulled over. That don't mean I did somethin' wrong. Maybe I made a mistake driving or maybe I ain't do nothing at all. And you keep your hands posted, because moving makes the police get all nervous. It can get real dangerous so don't argue with them but keep your hands where they can see 'em.

The father is telling Starr—the main character in the movie— how she has to be cautious when the police stop her, and explaining to her how she should act when that happens. In the same movie, Starr asks her uncle, a law enforcement officer, about what is the procedure they follow when they pull someone over and the person gives them a mixed signal like reaching to the inside of their car or move their hands. The uncle, with all honesty, answers that if it is a black person they do not hesitate, they shoot, and if it is a white person they would act more cautious and scream “put your hands up” (2018).

The problem is that this is implanted in the system. Moreover, the law always favors the privileged and supports the police officer for moral reasons alleging that it what a case of self-defence or a life-death situation. Evelyn Alsultany (2015), an associate professor in the Department of American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California (USC), claimed:

Posing an either/or option – either this is or is not a hate crime – does not help us understand what transpired. Racism is not an either/or phenomenon. It is deeply embedded in our society and, when left unchecked, has the potential to inform our perceptions and actions in ways not captured by a caricatured understanding of its diverse forms. Racism is not always conscious or intentional. It exists across a vast spectrum of consciousness and intentionality. As part of our subconscious, racism can manifest in the form of micro-aggressions that are often unintentional and sometimes even well-meaning. On the more dangerous side of the spectrum, it manifests in violence. We need to break the association of racism with intent because racism endures without it. (para. 5)

She is targeting a clear and concise message, which intends to exemplify the relationship that white people in America have towards racism. She claims that racism is fundamentally inscribed in the lives of all Americans who benefit from privilege. Consequently, as it is part of the subconscious, it is difficult to be noticed and; therefore, corrected. This

unconsciousness can lead to violence and to power; through the obliviousness that racism may be happening and present at all times, the motives and situations are questioned by the government when addressing a murder case. Usually the morality of the “accused” is put forward compared to the charges he/she may be facing or even the magnitude of the event. Alsultany states:

Our current cultural paradigm often makes a simplistic equation: Good people are well-intentioned and are therefore not racist; bad people are ill-intentioned and are therefore racist. Consequently, if the white police officers who killed Michael Brown and Eric Gardner are considered “good people” by their friends, families, and colleagues, their actions cannot be deemed racist. Such a conclusion focuses solely on intent and overlooks how members of the police – like all of us – have been shaped and influenced by notions of black men as threatening and how such cultural imagery has, in turn, structured racialized violence. (para. 6)

The police system is engrained in a bigger sociopolitical system. It was originally created to keep the minorities monitored and controlled and is still exerting that power. The law enforcement of the United States is highly embedded in an institutional racism that seems highly doubtful to change. The government of the U.S. has to reframe the policing system and what it means in the XXI century. In a lot of ways it seems like America is taking a step back into the past by making the African-American community be unfairly treated in the eyes of the law. The 13th Amendment makes it unconstitutional for someone to be a slave, and by that giving freedom to all Americans. So, is it not unconstitutional to massively persecute a certain community just because? People of color are slaves of the law. They are sentenced to lose against a white person no matter the crime.

Danez Smith (2017) has a very powerful poem named “recklessly” in which they write “it’s not a death sentence anymore / it’s not death anymore / It’s more / It’s a sentence / A sentence” (p.45). A sentence can mean both things: a phrase, or a form of prison; of being persecuted by the police: a death sentence. Smith creates a simile between a blood prison and the virus that is inside their body. Is America the virus that infects others? Danez seems to think that cops are running inside their veins (2017, p. 65), as a metaphor for the fact that cops are always something to be aware of, something to be on the look-out for. The danger and terror that African-Americans feel is depicted in the poem “Summer, Somewhere” in

which Danez depicts a beautiful picture, yet turns it upside down unequivocally by describing a scenario in which “boys become new moons”. They claim “we say our own names when we pray” (2017, p.3) to epitomise that fear of leaving home and not coming back.

### 2.3. *Police Brutality*

But the feeling you get when you are looking/  
at your child, turn your head/  
then, poof, no more child.  
—Danez Smith, “Not An Elegy” (2017, p.68)

Danez writes about fear towards the police, fear of being shot and fear of dying unarmed and non-guilty. But the African-American community has been fighting against police brutality and violence for hundreds of years. “No justice, no peace, No racist police”, a phrase that appears as a sign of protest because a black man has been murdered by a police officer in the movie *The Hate U Give* from 2018. It is a hymn that demands justice, and without it there can be no peace, not until the policing system is evaluated and changed for the better.

During the Civil rights movement in the 50s and 60s, it appeared a movement called the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, which also created a set of guidelines called The Ten-Point program. On May 15th 1967, these guidelines were released in the party’s newspaper. The issue was divided in two parts: What we want and What We Believe. In the part where What We Want is stated, point number 7 claims “We want an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of Black people” (P. Newton & Seale, 1967). Consequently, in the part What We Believe, points number 7, 8 and 9 claim: “7 We believe we can end police brutality in our Black community by organizing Black self-defense groups that are dedicated to defending our Black community from racist police oppression and brutality” (P. Newton & Seale, 1967). Number 8 claims “We believe that all Black people should be released from the many jails and prisons because they have not received a fair and impartial trial. And finally number 9 claims:

We believe that the courts should follow the United States Constitution so that Black people will receive fair trials. The 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution gives a



man a right to be tried by his peers. A peer is a persons from a similar economic, social, religious, geographical, environmental, historical, and racial background. To do this the court will be forced to select a jury from the Black community from which the Black defendant came. We have been, and are being tried by all-white juries that have no understanding of "the average reasoning man" of the Black community. (P. Newton & Seale, 1967)

Furthermore, these beliefs are only human rights that ought to be granted, and that are not being put in practice nowadays still. With the #BlackLivesMatter movement, there have been improvements done to take into account the lives that were being put aside by the government of the United States. In the preface of the book *Black against Empire: the history and the politics of the black panther party*, the authors claim:

Like the Black Panther Party, #BlackLivesMatter and other contemporary activists have coupled confrontational tactics with community organizing and sought to challenge racism by mobilizing against police brutality. And again, today antiracist activists face repression including state surveillance, arrests, and coordinated public vilification. As in the 1960s, the forces of racial retrenchment are eager to move on without disturbing the basic arrangements of white privilege...Indeed, each generation must make its own history, under new conditions, in new ways. Rather than emulating the specifics, we believe that developing effective antiracist practices today requires emulating the general political dynamic common to both the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Panther Party (Bloom & Martin, 2013).

The #BlackLivesMatter movement was specifically created to condemn the loss of the many lives of African-Americans in the United States, and the fact that they deserve basic human rights as well as white Americans. In contrast to this movement, another one called #AllLivesMatter was created alongside with the 2016 presidency. This movement, which claims that "all lives matter", is just an anti-black lives matter slogan to profess that white American lives matter more than anyone else's. The whole purpose of Black Lives Matter is the fact that their lives did not "matter" as much as white lives before that movement started. It is a vindication of life and of human rights, which white supremacists just saw as an imposition above their lives and privileges. The problem here is that white supremacists did

not come to terms with the fact that their lives have always mattered, and that they need no movement to promote such an issue.

In Danez Smith's poems, they pay tribute to a chain of deaths through five particular cases: "Trayvon Martin (2012, Sanford, FL); Renisha McBride (2013, Dearborn Heights, MI); Michael Brown (2014, Ferguson, MO); John Crawford, (2015, Beaver Creek, OH); and Brandon Zachary, a suicide (2011, St. Paul, Minnesota)". (Deas, 2006 p.109). And these are only a few of the many cases of death of African-Americans in the hands of the police. The death rate is continually increasing because of the laws in America, that always benefit the law enforcement officers, especially The Stand Your Ground Law. This law claims that anyone has a right to defend themselves if they are in a threatening situation, to the point of using lethal force upon the other person, like it is the case for what happened to Markeis McGlockton, who was brutally killed in Florida by a "stand your ground" shooter; and, due to this law, the killer was at first "charged with manslaughter" (Ortiz, 2018) and after paying the bond he was then released.

This law has met with some criticism for its critically approach to human lives versus a gun. As I have previously stated, and it is something that needs to stick, a gun has more power than a human life in America. And specially if the person or community is non-white. The senator Stephanie Flowers has been highly praised for her bravery and indignation when she spoke against The Stand Your Ground Law in the senate and claimed:

It doesn't take much to look on the local news every night and see how many Black kids, Black boys, Black men are being killed with these stand your ground defences that people raise, then they get off. So I take issue with that. I'm the only person here of color, ok? I am a mother, too. And I have a son. And I care as much for my son as y'all care for y'all. But my son doesn't walk the same path as yours does. I have feared for my sons life. And I worry about other little Black boys and girls. (2019)

Flowers stood up in the Senate against this law and gave hope to all those people who are on the streets fighting every day for their rights. "Watts in 1965, Newark in 1967, Miami in 1980, Los Angeles in 1992, Ferguson in 2015, Baltimore in 2016, Charlotte in 2016 – each of these cities went up in flames sparked by the police killing a black man" (Butler, 2017, para. 13). The African-American community is strong and prevails through all the hate, but has

raised awareness through their protests when an injustice takes place. The killings are so present that guns have been proven to matter more than human lives.

The guns America uses to kill people are taken care of with more love than the bodies it has killed, which are treated like garbage and are not even being mourned by those who held the gun and pulled the trigger. Guns are treated with more respect than human lives. In the poem “You’re Dead, America” Smith epitomises their view from the perspective of a community that is suffering oppression in America, but has fought in order to change it, and have desperately seen that there is no way to change what is broken to begin with. This poem represents desperation and resignation, understanding that in the end, a gun will always have more power than a community will. Danez (2017) claims:

but instead I did it  
in the daylight, wanting you

to see me ending you  
stupid stupid me

i know better than to fuck  
with a recipe

i don’t make chicken  
when I don’t have eggs

look at what i did: on the tv  
the man from tv

is gonna be president  
he has no words  
& hair beyond simile  
you’re dead, america

& where you died

grew something worse—

crop white as the smile  
of a man with his country on his side

a gun on his other (p. 75-76)

Smith is having a conversation with America, telling it that they tried to change it and failed. At the end of the day, a country and a gun go hand in hand. In the hands of the wrong person a simple machine that shoots fire can be too powerful, to others just fatal. Smith is saying that America cannot be changed and all hope is lost when guns outweigh human lives. Danez is creating a rhetoric in which they position themselves as a crucial piece of the puzzle in order to change everything that is wrong with America. It must be changed, but not by the oppressed ones, but by the ones who hold the privilege in their hands. Bodies must be mourned and justice must be made.

#### *2.4. Hierarchies of Death*

After all, if someone is lost, and that person is not someone,  
Then what and where is the loss, and how does mourning take place?

—Judith Butler, 2004, p.32

Public mourning and grieving of victims of racism has always been very invisible in the media and in national television. Lives are not considered to have the same value depending on race and ethnicity in the U.S. Judith Butler claims “If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated” (Butler 2004, p. 33). Social Darwinism created a rhetoric in which racism and discrimination against the under privileged was accepted in society. The idea that only those who are the “best” of society can survive feels surreal and terrifying, but somehow it is still applied on this day and age. This idea made social inequality become a normality, and therefore, and even through the opposition of this idea by

Theodore Roosevelt, we still have this concept very much engrained in our societies, specially in the American society.

The systemic oppression and racism could be analysed through Judith Butler's *Precariousness and Grievability* theory. Butler analyses the current situation of the United States<sup>5</sup> and balances the lives of the people that live in it. Butler (2004) mentions War and 9/11 as motives that have drawn the media to show which lives are more grieving than others. She claims that what is being done is "asking whose lives are considered valuable, whose lives are mourned, and whose lives are considered ungrievable" (2004, para. 5) instead of just asking why the government makes us wonder about whose lives are more valuable. Butler opens the question of morality claiming that we should ask ourselves what percentage of moral input we put into real issues that are happening in the world and how the media is portraying them. She concludes this chapter by saying that in the end "we are all precarious lives" (2004, para.10), as we all are subject to danger in some shape or form.

In the African-American community there is a big problem when it comes to media coverage on the multiple killings that happen in those neighbourhoods. Black bodies and their lives are not mourned the same way white lives are. Why is this? In *Precarious Lives*, in the chapter *Violence, Mourning, Politics*, Butler (2004) states "Lives are supported and maintained differently, and there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe" (p.32). She goes on to say that some lives are politically controlled and that in the bigger scheme of things, some lives truly are not meant to be mourned because the government wants it that way. Butler raises the question of "what makes for a grievable life" (p.34).

Privilege also gives you a higher position in the grieving hierarchical scale. Danez (2017) wrote in their poem "Dear White America": "I tried, white people. I tried to love you, but you spend my brother's funeral making plans for brunch, talking too loud next to his bones" (p. 25), as a way to show the frivolity of a life lost compared to some plans for lunch. A life that is not considered a grieving life will not be mourned the same way as another who is considered more important, and so people will give it less importance. It does not only apply for grief but also for protection. Some lives will be highly praised and protected, and

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<sup>5</sup> She mostly focuses on the situation after 9/11 focusing on the War on Terror, and after she refers to the situation between Israel and Palestine.

others will just exert their own privilege through their bodies. Judith Butler (2004) claimed “Certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as *grievable*.” (p.34).

Butler exemplifies a complicated conflict as death is by analysing how lives are really mourned, and why are some lives not mourned at all; in the media and in real life. She mentions obituaries as a means to depict a public death and claims: “If there were to be an obituary, there would have had to have been a life, a life worth noting, a life worth valuing and preserving, a life that qualifies for recognition” (2004, p.34). While I certainly disagree with this, this is what the media does. The lives that do not have a place in the media are not grieved the right way and therefore are not grieved at all. She goes on to say that it is quite impossible to “write obituaries for all those people, or for all people” (2004, p.34), but that the crucial question we should ask ourselves is merely “how the obituary functions as the instrument by which grievability is publicly distributed” (p.34). When a black person is killed we normally do not see it on the traditional media, but on other platforms in which people can speak freely, like for instance on Twitter. But we do not see it on national television because their lives are not considered “publicly grievable lives” (Butler, 2004, p.34), they are not recognised as so; and, therefore they end up being another product of the political racist system in the U.S.

### 3. WHITE PRIVILEGE AND SYSTEMATIC RACISM IN THE U.S

Life is all right in America,  
If you are a *white* in America  
—West Side Story, “America”, (1957)

#### 3.1. *Understanding privilege*

The school systems are fundamentally flawed all over the world. They should teach us about racism and injustice, and about how to respect each other. They do not do that. I understand this point to be of extreme importance as I admit I had no recollection of the injustices that were taking place. I was as oblivious as any other white person. You are twelve and the news are on because your parents are watching them. You hear, but you do not listen.

It does not affect you because you are not *those people*, you are not suffering their pain and; therefore, it is not something that should concern you, because you already have problems and preoccupations. You go to school and your classmates make a racist joke and later a sexist joke, and you do not care. You acknowledge the fact that there is something wrong, but you continue with your ordinary life. You go home and explain that joke and someone laughs, and later you completely forget about it because *Friends* is on in the TV. Now you are eighteen and you just finished High School. The world seems so right...or not. You are in the train and see a white woman clutching her purse when a person of color walks by, you see a man changing seats because the person next to him is not what he considers *normal*, dirty and afraid looks. It clicks in your mind. You realise that no-one is changing seats because of you or holding on to their pertinences or giving you dirty looks. In that moment it is imperative to speak up.

Theodore Roosevelt (1910) once said that democracy should destroy privilege and create equality. But it certainly has not. Privilege is so embedded in the white American minds that it is almost impossible to restrain from it. Power and privilege go hand in hand in order to create unfairness and substantially, violence and moral injustice. White people have created race, we are the ones that created a term to differentiate between different skin colors; differences that make us unique as humans. Race is a social construct that we decided was deemed necessary because we needed to exert our power through the color of our skin. It is only us who can change the current situation by being aware of our own whiteness and recognising it. But being white is also a social construct, it is also formulated by society. The author Toni Morrison (2012) claimed:

If the racist white person doesn't understand that he or she is also a race, is also constructed, is also made...but when you take it away, I take your race away. And there you are, and all you got is your lil self. And what is that? What are you without racism? Are you any good, are you smart, are you strong?

Starting the conversation about these imbalances of power and privilege is not easy. A privileged person will not recognise there is a problem and will most likely go for the “*why does it always have to be about race?*” question, to which Danez answers “because you made it that way” (Smith, 2017, p.25). This is one of the aspects that Smith criticises: “I am equal parts sick of your *go back to Africa & I just don't see race*” (2017, p.25), as for instance in

their poem “Dear White America”. But the fact is, and according to Bob Pease in *Undoing Privilege*, the people who claim that there is no black or white and that they just see human beings, are normally the racist ones (Pease, 2013); they are the ones who do not see the problem behind that narrative of “I just don’t see race”.

“If you can only be tall because someone is on their knees, then you have a serious problem” (Morrison, 2012). In the podcast Dear Sugars by the New York Times with Catrice M. Jackson called “Talking About Privilege”, the conversation about white privilege continued in a very organic and simple way. Catrice (2019) claimed: “We have to destroy imbalances of power between people. We have to come to terms on how is power realised in the world and how it is used in our world in the XXI century” She says that privilege has to be used in order to create a good outcome. We have to use our privileges in ways that will benefit others. In the podcast they claim:

White people need to be intentional in being allies, in being accomplices. We need to commit to being anti-racist. All of us white people. We, who enjoy race and class privilege, we need to be actively defining alternative standards (2019).

Us who are privileged should be starting the right conversation about race, and supporting the movement. Instead, white supremacy is on the rise, and when white supremacists are confronted about racism “Their mouths twitch as they<sup>6</sup> get defensive, their throats open as they try to interrupt, itching to talk over you, but not really listen, because they need to tell you that you’ve got it wrong” (Eddo-Lodge, 2017). Eddo-Lodge also claimed in her book *Why I’m No Longer Talking To White People About Race* “They never had to think about what it means to be white”, but white people have made them aware of the color of their skin. We made them aware that they were different because their skin was a different color than ours. We should not have guilt for what has happened in the past, but we have to understand the current situation, and how it is not as different of how it used to be.

Privilege has always meant power, an invisible power (Pease, 2013) and it will continue to be like this unless we change our perspective on it. There is a “white perspective” (Eddo-Lodge, 2017) on racism as there is also one on feminism. As a woman in the XXI century, I understand oppression and see the privilege men have acquired over time, and it is

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<sup>6</sup> Here she is referring to those who are privileged but deny so, and when they are confronted, they get defensive and cannot admit it.



a fight that I intend to fight until it is fixed. Eddo-Lodge (2018) argues in her book that people who do not see privilege and that allege that they do not see race, also ask questions like “Why can we not be humanists? Why feminists or anti-racists?” to which she answers “Well, because something happen to you specifically because you are a woman or a person of color. There is structural power trying to marginalise certain people, those who are women, those who are not white.” (2018).

Moreover, privilege is not always bad if treated correctly. bell hooks believes that “privilege is not in itself bad, what matters is what we do with privilege. We need to share our resources and take direction about how to use our privilege in ways that empower those who lack it.” (2006). So perhaps, instead of denying the fact that privileges exist, we should change from this excessive, uncritical jingoistic nationalism (Eddo-Lodge, 2017), and stop this cultural amnesia that we have been putting aside for so long.

There is an overall lack of consciousness from white people: “a lot of people are waking up to the fact that what has happened in our nation require us to have a deeper and more intentional sense of consciousness about how we make real change in the world” (M.Jackson, 2019). Bob Pease (2013) argues about that and raises questions for the reader to answer and to rethink their actions. He claims that privileged groups believe that they have a right to be respected, acknowledged, protected and rewarded, which they have, but he believes those privileged groups have a sense of entitlement to them, that they claim they are better than other communities or groups. He believes that being an ally is possible but only if the person who wishes to be an ally keeps proving that they are; therefore, he claims that it is possible to develop an anti-racist white stand point and promote critical thinking within the community (Pease, 2013).

### *3.2. Silence*

So it is better to speak up  
remembering  
we were never meant to survive  
—“A litany for survival”, Audre Lorde (1978)

Is silence better than speaking up? Danez answers that quite clearly by just their poems in *Don't Call us Dead*. The poems are speaking up, they are raising the voices of the oppressed and claiming equality, claiming peace. Their poems are powerful and filled with fights against silence, and those who want to silence others. America silences. The bodies that are not mourned in America, are mourned in Danez's poems. They utter the cruel reality, they do not shy away from it. The fact that Danez wants to be identified by the pronoun "they" already gives a sense of fighting against silence, as a community is always easier to hear than an individual.

After 9/11, silence became very apparent as words were difficult to be articulated. Silence seems necessary when such chaos is upon a society that has suffered a tremendous shock. People were also silent when the War on Terror was proclaimed and when thousands of innocents were killed and millions of dollars were spent because America<sup>7</sup> thought that the answer was to fight terror with more terror. Silence has always been present in the life of African-Americans starting with the way history is told. It seems like their history has been corrupted and purposely miscommunicated by white Americans in order to diminish the reality of the facts.

In 1955 in Montgomery Alabama, Rosa Parks refused to stand up and give up her seat to a white person, and in 2018, a white teacher told her students that she did not stand up because she had "tired feet and it had been a long day, and she was tired of oppression and she was old" (Ikard, 2018). In the TED Talk given by David Ikard, he explains how a teacher told his son a false history fact about Rosa Parks about the reason why she did not stand up when the bus driver told her so. He calls this "whitewashing Black history", which is a very common resource nowadays. We should question the history that has been given to us. Like Audre Lorde (1979) wisely wrote in her letter to Mary Daly, "Assimilation within a solely western European history is not acceptable".

It is important to speak up about what is wrong about society. This is what Danez does in their poems. They signify a choir, Danez speaks and the community responds. Religion is very important in Danez's poems and the Church is the epitome of a united community who

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<sup>7</sup> In this instance I decided to mention America in general as the decisions of the former president George W. Bush affected the whole nation.

respects each individual and who speaks up about injustice. In the poem “Dear White America” Danez claims:

& this life, this new story & history you cannot steal or sell or cast overboard or hang  
or beat or drown or own or redline or shackle or silence or cheat or choke or cover up  
or jail or shoot or jail or shoot or jail or shoot or ruin / this, if only this one, is  
ours” (2017, p.25)

The feeling of community and unity is very significant in this poem. It fights back while telling the cruel reality of the manipulation behind African-American lives. Danez speaks for their own community. In an interview Smith (2018) claimed:

I did not become a poet for career success, I did not get into this genre so that people could tell me that I was good, I started being a poet because it allowed me to say something and it gave me access to a community that I could access no other way. I am writing these poems because they are urgent, I am writing these poems because there is something shut up in me that must come out.

Danez creates a safe space in their poems for their community to feel identified, and to have a safe environment to feel understood. It is very important to speak up against racism, as it is so present in a lot of people’s lives. Lives that are important and valuable. As someone who does not suffer from racial oppression, I felt like speaking up about this subject because we need to use our privilege in ways so that we can help other people. James Baldwin (1970) once said “We live in an age in which silence is not only criminal but suicidal” (para.3), so we have to “make noise” (Baldwin, 1970), we have to speak up. Those who are not oppressed shall raise their voices (always in a secondary position, as they are not the important ones in the fight) along with the oppressed, as they can touch more people and get to a bigger audience. Let’s end silence and speak up about injustice and against racism. Let’s speak up about changing America to a better America.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

“Tomorrow I’ll Have Hope”

—Danez Smith, “You’re dead, America”, (2017, p.75)

The United States have always been a referent for me. An “ideal” place to live where opportunities were abundant and where dreams were achieved. I grew up being told that America was the place to be if you wanted to succeed. A place where nothing bad happened and where people got along and lived in peace and harmony. This thought disappeared quite fast when I could think for myself, and what I discovered was not pretty and definitely not ideal. In this day and age racism seems to be long gone for some people, not because it truly is abolished, but because they refuse to acknowledge it. To be completely honest, I thought it was gone as well. Until I started listening, I started observing, I started realising all the little—and not so little—things that were occurring around me everyday. The disapproving looks, holding tight to a purse or a bag, whispers. I felt hopeless.

At this point we have already established what the problem is, and some of us are trying to change it, and be better. What is left to do is have hope that there is a better future coming forward. A new generation who may begin to understand what respect means towards others, and a generation who will change the way we see each other. We have to start with ourselves and with our own consciousness. We have to listen and respect, as we have not been doing that until now.

I want to finish this essay with a message of hope. But it will not be from me, it will be from those who still suffer and still pray. From those oppressed and yet radiant, from those discriminated against and still morally elevated, from those communities that deserve so much better. In “Let America Be America Again”, Langston Hughes (1936) claimed: O, yes, / I say it plain, / America never was America to me, / And yet I swear this oath— / America will be!” A message of hope for his community and for America that resonates now as much as it did back then.

Danez also sends a message of hope in their book, one that resonated with their whole community. A message of creating joy out of being who they are, of loving themselves and knowing their worth. In *Don't Call Us Dead*, Smith (2017) beautifully describes a delusion of a better America in their poem “Tonight, In Oakland” in which Smith seems to ask the night and God for a moment of happiness in which guns are long gone and the police kneels down in forgiveness:

& God, tonight, let them dance! tonight  
guns don't exist. Tonight, the police

have turned to their God for forgiveness.

tonight, we bury nothing, we serve God  
with no need for shovels, God with a bad hip

& a brother in jail. tonight, prisons turn to tulips

& prisoner means *one who dances in a yellow field*. (p.79)

There is faith in a better America which might understand that change is inevitable in certain situations, and that it may bring happier times. When Barack Obama was president of the United States, the whole world regained hope in humanity. It was a historic moment that helped move a step-forward in the history of the U.S and of the world. He brought love and empathy into this world during his presidency and continues to do so to this day. Michelle Obama as the First Lady also represented kindness, strength and love for her country and for the people in it. The Obamas really tried to better America, and even though they did not succeed in every aspect of it, they were magnificent at showing love and support for not only their community, but all Americans. They included everyone in their discourse and made sure everyone felt represented through their actions and their world. Ta-Nahesi Coates claims in his article:

By Obama's lights, there was no liberal America, no conservative America, no black America, no white America, no Latino America, no Asian America, only "the United States of America. All these disparate strands of the American experience were bound together by a common hope: It's the hope of slaves sitting around a fire singing freedom songs; the hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores; the hope of a young naval lieutenant bravely patrolling the Mekong Delta; the hope of a mill worker's son who dares to defy the odds; the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too. (2017, He Walked on Ice but Never Fell section, para. 3-4).

There is still light at the end of the tunnel, and if we raise our voices and speak against inhumanity, we can create a better future for all. Oppression is so present in our lives that sometimes we forget to acknowledge it is even there: racism, sexism. America is corrupted with oppression, but there is hope. The land of the free and the home of the brave is not so

free and brave after all. But it can be, “America will be” (Hughes, 1936). I think it is only fair to end with a sentence from one of Danez’s (2017) poems in which they claim that until America is not the one it should be, “don’t call us dead, call us alive someplace better” (p.3).

who can’t say it to my face in public. no chicken jokes in this movie.  
no bullet holes in the heroes. & no one kills the black boy. & no one kills  
the black boy. & no one kills the black boy. besides, the only reason  
i want to make this is for the first scene anyway: little black boy  
on the bus with his toy dinosaur, his eyes wide & endless

his dreams possible, pulsing, & right there  
—“Dinosaurs in the Hood”, Danez Smith (2017, p.27)

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